

## On Repentance by St. John of Kronstadt

"If you fall, rise and you shall be saved." You are a sinner, you continually fall, learn also how to rise; be careful to acquire this wisdom. This is what the wisdom consists in: learning by heart the psalm, "Have mercy upon me, O God, after Thy great goodness," inspired by the Holy Spirit to the king and prophet David, and say it with sincere faith and trust, with a contrite and humble heart. After your sincere repentance, expressed in the words of King David, the forgiveness of your sins shall immediately shine upon you from the Lord, and your spiritual powers will be at peace. The most important thing in life is to be zealous for mutual love, and not to judge anyone. Everybody shall answer for himself to God, and you must look to yourself. Beware of malice.



### Excerpts from the diary of St. John of Kronstadt

Remember the abyss of the Saviour's mercy and love to mankind. The Devil will represent the Lord's face to you as terrible and unmerciful, rejecting your prayer and repentance; but remember the Saviour's own words, full of every hope and boldness for us: "Him that cometh to Me, I will in no wise cast out;" [337] and "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden" — with sins and iniquities, and the wiles and calumnies of the Devil — "and I will give you rest." [338]

Everyone busies himself about elegant and clean clothing for the body, everyone tries to dress with taste and elegance, but who thinks of the incorruptible raiment, which is all defiled with sins, and in which we all shall have to appear before God the Judge? Who washes it with tears of repentance, with works of mercy, adorns it by fasting, prayer, watchfulness, and pious meditation?

I thank Thee, Lord, for bestowing new life upon me each time, when, with tears of repentance and gratitude, I celebrate the Divine Liturgy and partake of Thy most pure and life-giving Mysteries.

How easily and speedily the Lord can save us! — instantaneously, unexpectedly, imperceptibly. Often during the day I have been a great sinner, and at night, after prayer, I have gone to rest, justified and whiter than snow by the grace of the Holy Spirit, with the deepest peace and joy in my heart! How

easy it will be for the Lord to save us too in the evening of our life, at the decline of our days! O! save, save, save me, most gracious Lord; receive me in Thy heavenly Kingdom! Everything is possible to Thee.

To repent means to feel in our hearts the falsehood, the madness, the guilt of our sins, it means to acknowledge that we have offended, by them, our Creator, our Lord, our Father and Benefactor, Who is infinitely holy, and infinitely abhors sin, it means, to desire, with the whole soul, to amend and to expiate our sins.

Why does not the sinful soul obtain remission of its sins before it feels all their foolishness, all their destructiveness, and all their falsity from the whole heart? Because the heart is our soul; as it committed the sins, finding them at the time pleasant and plausible, therefore it must now repent of them and recognise them as leading to destruction and entirely wrong. This repentance is accomplished painfully in the heart, as the desire to sin is also usually in the heart.

To what end do fasting and penitence lead? For what purpose is this trouble taken? They lead to the cleansing of the soul from sins, to peace of heart, to union with God; they fill us with devotion and sonship, and give us boldness before God. There are, indeed, very important reasons for fasting and for confession from the whole heart. There shall be an inestimable reward given for conscientious labour.

If you sin in any way before God (and we sin every day greatly), immediately say in your heart, with faith in the Lord, who hears the sobs of your heart, with the humble acknowledgment and feeling of your sins, the Psalm: "Have mercy upon me, O God, after Thy great goodness;" and say the whole Psalm heartily. If it does not take effect the first time, try again, only say it still more heartily, still more feelingly, and then salvation and peace of soul shall speedily shine upon you from the Lord. Thus be always contrite; this is the true proved remedy against sins. If still you do not obtain relief, blame yourself. It shows that you have prayed without contrition, without humility of heart, without a strong desire to obtain forgiveness of sins from God; it shows that you are not deeply grieved at your sin.

Have many of us the feeling of sonlike love to God?

Dare many of us, without condemnation and with boldness call upon the Father in Heaven and say: "Our Father"...? Is there not, on the contrary, no such sonlike voice to be heard in our hearts, which are deadened by the vanities of this world and attachments to its objects and pleasures? Is not our Heavenly Father far from our hearts? Is it not rather an avenging God that we should represent to ourselves, we who have withdrawn ourselves from Him into a far-away land? Yes, by our sins all of us are worthy of His righteous anger and punishment, and it is wonderful how long-suffering and forbearing He is to us — that He does not strike us like the barren fig trees. Let us hasten to propitiate Him by repentance and tears. Let us enter into ourselves; let us consider our unclean hearts in all strictness, and when we see what a multitude of impurities are keeping them from the reach of Divine grace, we shall ourselves acknowledge that we are spiritually dead.

It is said: "Repent ye; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." [402] Is at hand — that is, it has come by itself. It is not necessary to seek for it long — it seeks us, our free inclination; that is, you yourself must repent with heartfelt contrition.

Concerning penitence. Penitence should be sincere, perfectly free, and not in any way forced by any particular time and habit, or by the person before whom the sinner confesses. Otherwise it would not be true penitence.

Consciousness, memory, imagination, feeling, and will are helps to penitence. As we sin with all the powers of our soul, so penitence must be from our whole soul. Penitence in words only, without the intention of amendment and without the feeling of contrition, may be called hypocritical.

Take the trouble to spend only one single day according to God's commandments, and you will see yourself, you will feel by your own heart, how good it is to fulfil God's will (and God's will in relation to us is our life, our eternal blessedness). Love God with all your heart at least as much as you love your father, your mother, and your benefactors; value with all your strength His love and His benefits to you (go over them mentally in your heart, think how He gave you existence and with it all good things, how endlessly long He bears with your sins, how endlessly He forgives you them; for the sake of your hearty repentance, by virtue of the suffering and death upon the Cross of His only-begotten Son, what blessedness He has promised you in eternity, if you are faithful to Him); enumerate besides His mercies, which are endlessly great and manifold.

Let us fear hardened insensibility to our sins; let us fear the pride of our hearts, which says: "I do not need any forgiveness of sins; I am not guilty, I am not sinful"; or else: "My sins are trifling, they are only human ones" as though it were necessary that they should be diabolical; or: "I do not feel amiss living in my sins." This is the pride of Satan, and it is Satan himself speaking these words in our hearts. Let us feel deeply, deeply, with our whole hearts, our innumerable iniquities; let us sigh for them from the very depths of our souls; let us shed tears of contrition for them, in order to propitiate to mercy the Master, Whom we have angered. Let us not in the least justify ourselves like the Pharisees, the hypocrites: "For in Thy sight," it is said, "shall no man living be justified;" [858] and we can only propitiate God to be merciful unto us by sincere repentance for our sins. Let us put aside indifference and coldness; let us labour unto the Lord with a fervent spirit. Do not let us forget that we have now come to propitiate the Master of our lives and our righteous Judge for a long period of our sinful lives. Is this, therefore, a time for any coldness and indifference, which are not approved of even in social intercourse, in our relations with our fellow-men? Ought not our soul, on the contrary, to be turned into a spiritual fire, and pour itself forth in tears of most heartfelt repentance? O, my God, my God! our iniquities have literally increased beyond the number of the hairs of our heads, above the number of the sand of the sea, and yet we do not feel them, we are indifferent to them; we even do not cease to love them. "If Thou, Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?" [859] Grant, Lord, unto us all a contrite spirit and a humble heart, so that we may offer to Thee true penitence. Amen.

How can the kingdom of God come to a man during his present life? Through hearty repentance. "Repent ye; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.", [154] Let the impious man then give up his godless opinions, the mercenary his love of money, the deceiver his deceitfulness, the drunkard his drinking, the glutton his gluttony, the dissolute his dissipation, the proud his pride, the vain his vanity, the envious, the insatiable, his envy and his insatiableness, the impatient and murmurer his impatience and murmuring, and let everyone learn to do the acts of Christian love, and especially "to bear the infirmities of the weak." [155]

Our Lord is mightier than the Devil. If the Devil still lives and works in our hearts through our attachments to earthly things, then how shall not Christ enter into our heart, through faith and repentance, when it was created to be the temple of God?

Pronounce the words of the prayer with heartfelt firmness. When praying in the evening, do not forget to confess in prayer to the Holy Spirit with all sincerity and contrition, those sins into which you have fallen during the past day. A few moments of fervent repentance, and you will be cleansed by the Holy Spirit from every impurity; you will be whiter than snow, and tears, purifying the heart will flow from

your eyes; you will be covered with the garment of Christ's righteousness and united to Him, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

What would it have been if God's preventive grace had not been bestowed upon us; if it did not unexpectedly, suddenly embrace all our being after we have sinned, and incline our hearts to repentance and tears? What if it had been left to us to obtain it by our own efforts only? How accursed would we men then have been! Few, very few, could have been delivered from the burden of their sins, for our nature is slothful in exerting itself to effort, especially in the spiritual life; and without help, without powerful facility and the delights of spiritual labours, it would have abandoned them, and would have thrown aside the work of its salvation. But now God, the Most Wise and Merciful Father, sometimes lightens and sweetens our spiritual burden, sometimes makes it heavier for our trial, to teach us patience, and to weaken our crafty, destructive flesh, wisely changing the one by the other; and the work of our salvation, thank God, is thus always made possible — not too difficult, and very often pleasant to us.

It is only necessary to represent to yourself and firmly believe that the Holy Spirit is everywhere, in every place; that He is an incomplex Being, that in Him all heaven is near us, as upon the palm of the hand, with all its angels and saints, so that we have only to call upon the Lord, or upon the Virgin Mother of God, or any saint from the depth of the heart, with clear-sighted faith, with heartfelt repentance for the sins by which we are bound by the enemy or by which we have bound voluntarily ourselves — and our salvation will immediately shine forth. Marvellous is the saving power of our Lady; it flows into the heart like a healing balsam, or like fragrant, life-giving air, or like calming water. Only look on Her with the eyes of your heart, trusting in Her mercy and help.

I thank Thee, my Lord, my Master, and my Judge, for teaching me how to pray simply to Thee, for hearing my calling upon Thee, for saving me from my sins and sorrows, and for rightly directing my ways. I called upon Thee (in the sin of my wickedness) in the words of the church prayer: "O, Lord, our God, Who grantest forgiveness unto men through repentance ....." And as soon as I finished this prayer, peace and lightness established themselves in my soul.

Sins are secret serpents, gnawing at the heart of a man and all his being; they do not let him rest, they continually suck his heart; sins are prickly thorns, constantly goring the soul; sins are spiritual darkness. Those who repent must bring forth the fruits of repentance.

I love to pray in God's temple, especially within the holy altar, before the Holy Table or the Prothesis, for by God's grace I become wonderfully changed in the temple. During the prayer of repentance and devotion the thorns, the bonds of the passions, fall from my soul, and I feel so light; all the spell, all the enticement of the passions vanish, and I seem to die to the world, and the world, with all its blessings, dies for me. I live in God and for God, for God alone. I am wholly penetrated by Him, and am one spirit with Him. I become like a child soothed on its mother's knee. Then my heart is full of most heavenly, sweet peace. My soul is enlightened by the light of heaven. At such times we see everything clearly; we look upon everything rightly; we feel friendship and love towards everyone, even towards our enemies, readily excusing and forgiving everyone. O, how blessed is the soul when it is with God! Truly the Church is earthly paradise.

If you experience a feeling of hunger or thirst, and wish to eat and drink, think of the hunger or thirst of the soul (it thirsts after righteousness, for justification, Christ, for sanctification), which, if you do not satisfy, your soul may die from hunger, crushed by the passions, weakened and exhausted; and in satisfying your bodily hunger, do not forget to appease, above all and before all, your spiritual hunger,

by conversing with God, by heart-felt repentance for your sins, by reading the story and precepts of the Gospel, and especially by the communion of the Divine Mysteries of the Body and Blood of Christ. If you are fond of dressing elegantly, or when you put on your clothes, think of the incorruptible garment of righteousness, in which our souls should be arrayed, or of Jesus Christ Who is our spiritual raiment, as it is said: "For as many of you as have been baptised into Christ, have put on Christ." [703] A passion for dress often entirely thrusts out from the heart the very thought of the incorruptible raiment of the soul, and turns the whole life into vain care about elegance in dress.

Nothing in the world is more important than the salvation of human souls, and there is no subject more worthy of unceasing and perpetual remembrance than the redemption of the world by the Son of God from sin, the curse and eternal death. The Holy Church has engraved in her Divine services, by means of eternally indelible letters, by images and rites, the whole ordering of our salvation, in order that men — so inclined to forget God, and the salvation of their souls, and all that God has done for their salvation, eternal joy and bliss — should constantly have, so to say, before their eyes, and as though within their reach, all God's great, most wise and good deeds concerning them, and that they may continually be urged to repentance, amendment, and salvation, and shun the vanities of this corrupt and fleeting world. "The world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever." [979]

Do not forget yourself in looking upon the bodily face — look more attentively with your inward vision upon the face of your soul, what aspect it wears: is it not disfigured by the passions? and if so, destroy this disfigurement by prayer and tearful repentance. Do not forget yourself in looking upon beautiful raiment: it is corruption; but consider the incorruptible raiment of your soul, in what state it is: is it not hideous and impure, owing to frequent transgressions, both secret and evident; and strive to clothe your soul in the imperishable beauty of meekness, humility, chastity and purity, mercy and righteousness.

Afflictions are a great teacher; afflictions show us our weaknesses, passions, and the need of repentance; afflictions cleanse the soul, they make it sober, as from drunkenness, they bring down grace into the soul, they soften the heart, they inspire us with a loathing for sin, and strengthen us in faith, hope, and virtue.

As God is a thinking Being, it is extremely easy to lose Him from the heart; and it is equally easy to regain Him in the heart by means of steadfast repentance.

Wonderful is the power of faith! Only the lively thought of God only heartfelt faith in Him is required, and He is with me; only hearty repentance for sins, with faith in Him, is required, and He is with me; one good thought, and He is with me; a pious feeling, and He is with me.

"He that eateth My flesh, and drinketh My blood, dwelleth in Me, and I in him." [1117] This we feel, and experience confirms it. Most blessed, most full of life is the man who communicates of the Holy Mysteries with faith and heartfelt repentance for his sins. This we truly feel, and the contrast is also manifest. If we approach the Holy Cup without sincere repentance for sin, and with doubt, then Satan enters into us, and dwells in us, destroying our soul, and this, too, is most perceptible.

For the sake of our faith alone, the spiritual mountains — that is, the heights and burdens of sins — are removed. This is why, when Christians release themselves from the burden of their sins by repentance and confession, they sometimes say, "Thank God, a mountain has fallen off my shoulders!"

May the infinite love and mercy of the Lord triumph, in consequence of our sincere recognition and confession of our sins; and may the sinful flattery of the Devil, teaching us to conceal our sins and not to acknowledge them, be covered with shame! May all the snares and bonds of the Devil be torn asunder by our repentance, like a cobweb! The Devil seeks that we should conceal our sins, and thus give ourselves up to them in secret still more and more easily; but let us even here destroy his snares and wiles; let us confess our sins, in order that we ourselves and all others may see to what abomination we are giving ourselves up or have given ourselves up, and that thus, by recognising this abomination, we may more easily amend. "Tell," it is said, "all thine iniquities," and do not be silent about them, "that thou mayest be justified."

"The Lord turned and looked upon Peter . . . and Peter went out, and wept bitterly." [1309] And even now, when the Lord looks upon us we weep bitterly over our sins. Yes, our tears during prayer mean that the Lord has looked upon us with His gaze, that gives life to everything and trieth the hearts and reins. Ah! the soul is sometimes entangled and ensnared by sins, like a bird in the net! We do not sometimes see any outlet from our sins, and they torment us; the heart sometimes feels terribly anxious and sorrowful on account of them; but "Jesus looks upon us, and streams of tears flow from our eyes, and with the tears all the tissue of evil in our soul vanishes; we weep and rejoice that such mercy has been suddenly and unexpectedly sent to us; what warmth we then feel in our heart, and what lightness, as though we could fly up to the Lord God Himself! I thank the Lord with all my heart for freely forgiving all my sin! [1310]

For what purpose does the Lord add day after day, year after year, to our existence? In order that we may gradually put away, cast aside, evil from our souls, each one his own, and acquire blessed simplicity; in order that we may become, for instance, gentle as lambs, simple as infants; in order that we may learn not to have the least attachment to earthly things, but like loving, simple children, may cling with all our hearts to God alone, and love Him with, all our hearts, all our souls, all our strength, and all our thoughts, and our neighbour as ourselves. Let us hasten; therefore, to pray to the Lord, fervently and tearfully, to grant us simplicity of heart, and let us strive by every means to cast out the evil from our souls — for instance, evil suspiciousness, malevolence, malignity, malice, pride, arrogance, boastfulness, scornfulness, impatience, despondency, despair, irascibility and irritability, tearfulness and faintheartedness, envy, avarice, gluttony, and satiety; fornication, mental and of the heart, and actual fornication; the love of money, and in general the passion for acquisition; slothfulness, disobedience, and all the dark horde of sins. Lord, without Thee we can do nothing! Bless us Thyself in this work, and give us the victory over our enemies and our passions. So be it!

[154] *St. Matthew iii. 2.*

[155] *Romans xv. 1.*

[337] *St. John vi. 37.*

[338] *St. Matthew xi. 28.*

[402] *St. Matthew iv. 7.*

[858] *Psalm cxliii. 2.*

[859] *Psalm cxxx. 3.*

[979] *1 John ii. 17.*

[1117] *St. John vi. 56.*

[1309] *St. Luke xxii. 61, 62.*

[1310] *Psalm ciii. 3.*

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